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Customs drug crackdown clogs all California border crossings

By John McCaslin
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A U.S. Customs Service crackdown at all five of California's border crossings is causing delays of two hours or more for commuters entering the United States from Mexico.

Officials say the intensified enforcement, aimed at stopping the flow of drugs, could go on "indefinitely."

At the same time — while other federal agencies are gearing for budget cuts — Customs plans to hire 38 more agents to strengthen its drug interdiction forces at California's border crossings.

"To put it plainly, we're determined to stop the drug market," said Allan Rappaport, Customs director in San Diego, in a telephone interview.

At times, Mr. Rappaport said, only five of the 24 lanes at the busy San Ysidro crossing between San Diego and Tijuana have been open this week, resulting in delays of anywhere from one to two hours.

"The maximum time anyone will be delayed is 2 hours," he said. The normal wait is about 20 minutes.

Attorney General Edwin Meese III said earlier this week that the interdiction effort "is not any part of a nationwide campaign."

"These are taken periodically along the border and at different locations," said Mr. Meese. "We don't talk about how long they're going to last, as this provides information over to the traffickers on how long they have to wait."

A spokesman for the International Chamber of Commerce in San Diego, Anabel Ibarra, said in a telephone interview that she waited about 2 1/2 hours yesterday morning to cross into the United States from her home in nearby Tijuana.

"It's very bad, and as a result businesses along the border area are suffering," said Miss Ibarra, whose office represents businesses on both sides of the border.

Some 30,000 vehicles enter the United States through the San Ysidro border crossing, located between Tijuana and San Diego, every day.

Mr. Rappaport said the intensified drug interdiction effort was not an attempt on the part of the United States to put pressure on

Mexico, a major source and producer of illegal narcotics.

"We're not stopping every car," he said. "This is not another Camarena investigation. We're being selective."

Mr. Rappaport was referring to last year's kidnapping and subsequent slaying of U.S. narcotics agent Enrique Camarena Salazar, when traffic was stalled at the same border crossings in an attempt to bring pressure on Mexican officials to increase their efforts in locating the missing agent.

Instead, he said, "Intelligence tells us a lot [of illegal drugs] are getting through the border."

Just five years ago, Mr. Rappaport explained, few attempts were made to smuggle major shipments of drugs into California. However, he said, successful federal drug interdiction efforts in the Florida and Caribbean region in recent years have "driven smuggling westward."

"In 1980 we seized only 4 pounds of cocaine at our [California] border stations," Mr. Rappaport said. "In this first quarter of this year we've already confiscated 131 pounds [of cocaine] — very high quality stuff."

He said most of the drugs, mainly marijuana, cocaine and heroin, enter southern California aboard aircraft, boats or trucks.

"We see it come in in every way imaginable. Yesterday we seized a pedestrian, a Latin male from Tijuana, with 3/4 of a pound of pure Mexican brown heroin sewn into his clothing. I bet it would have been worth up to near \$1 million," Mr. Rappaport said.

The San Diego Customs director also confirmed that his office was now interviewing applicants to increase its forces at all five border crossing stations. "We're going to hire another 37 or 38 people," he said.

"Our commitment is interdicting as much as possible, so we will stay with an intensified effort," Mr. Rappaport said.

Meanwhile, authorities in Tucson, Ariz., this week continue seeking clues in the shooting death of U.S. Customs agent Glenn R. Miles near the Mexican border last month.

Mr. Miles was on a drug patrol when he radioed to authorities that he was chasing several drug runners back toward the Mexican line. When help arrived, Mr. Miles was found dead.